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MODERN PERSIAN LITERATURE.

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THROUGH the medium of Omar Khayyām and his inspired interpreter, Edward Fitzgerald, a peculiar interest has of late been aroused, on either side of the Atlantic, in Persian Thought and Literature. The object of the present article is to offer to those amateurs whose acquaintance with Modern Persian Literature is confined to translation a brief survey of its rise and of its present status in the kingdom of the Shah.

It is curious to note how universal the opinion is, among the uninitiated, that the Persians do not possess a Literature in the accepted sense of the term. This popular misconception is, no doubt, partly due to the fact that those who have undertaken to clothe the Persian Muse in English dress have confined their choice to a limited number of poets, and have produced fresh versions of the poems of Sādi Hāfiz and Omar in large numbers, to the almost entire neglect of the other great singers of Iran. After all, it is the scholar who must be the first means of introducing a foreign poet into a new language; and Persian, for a long time, suffered from a marked neglect at the hands of Orientalists. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which produced many notable Oriental scholars—especially in Hebrew and Arabic—Persian was merely regarded as a side-study, and hardly taken seriously; almost the only Europeans who turned their attention to that language were resident diplomatists in India and travellers in Persia. Although many of these obtained a fair knowledge of Persian, they merely learnt it for official or practical purposes; and in acquiring it, under the guidance of natives, they probably seldom read anything beyond a few of the best-known classics, without inquiring into, or even hearing of, any Literature be-

yond. The interest of scholars in Persia was, however, at length aroused by the "discovery" of the sacred books of the Zoroastrians, and the decipherment of the Achemedian Inscriptions. And it was through this new interest in Persia that, at the beginning of the present century, Persian began to be studied for its own sake, and assumed an important place in the list of Oriental studies.

In 642 A. D. the Persians suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Arabs at the battle of Nahāvand, and, with the fall of Merv, in 651, the fate of the old Zoroastrian State was decided. The overwhelming progress of the arms of the Arabs was only equalled by the rapid dissemination of their creed and language. Wherever the conquering Arab established himself, there, too, sprang into practice his new religion and his old language. In Persia, with the suddenness of magic, Ormuzd and Ahriman were changed for Allāh and Satan, and the solar for the lunar year. Such was, at any rate, the case to all outward appearance, and, so long as the Kalifate remained in the hands of the powerful house of Omayya, the language of Persia seems to have relapsed into silence, and her national spirit into obscurity. For a period of about one hundred and fifty years we find no trace of a national literature, nor have we any means of forming a precise notion of the language spoken by the Persians during that time. As far as documentary evidence is concerned, we pass directly from the old Parsī of the "Fire Worshipping Guebres" to the modern Persian, with its predominant element of Arabic words and expressions—an essentially Mohammedan language.

So long as the Central Government in Baghdad made its authority to be felt throughout the Eastern conquests of Islam, which extended from the Persian Gulf to the frontiers of Chinese Turkestan, the language and culture of the Kalif were predominant in every province. It must, however, be admitted that the Court of Baghdad owed more than half its brilliancy to the Persians themselves; it was conducted on lines closely imitative of the late Sassanids court at Ctesiphon, and though the Arabs, at the period of their emigration from the deserts of Arabia, possessed a rich and powerful language, together with an innate taste for poetry, they had but a small degree of culture. Moreover, wherever the Arabs carried their arms, they were on the look-out for men of genius and learning among the conquered,

and, having found them, would send them to Baghdad to add lustre to the literary circle gathered round the Kalif. And thus the very circumstances which retarded the growth of a national Persian Literature were those which conduced to the intellectual brilliancy of the Kalif's court.

In the middle of the eighth century the Umayyads fell and gave way to the House of Abbās, whose power in her Eastern Provinces was never firmly established, and became weaker every year. And thus, at the beginning of the ninth century, we meet with the establishment of semi-independent dynasties in the East and Northeast of Persia.

The first poem composed in the modern Persian language, which has come down to us, is a short ode, by a certain Abbās, in honor of the arrival in Merv, in 809, of Mámūn, the son of the famous Hārūn al-Rashīd. It is most probable, however, that very little encouragement was given to the development of the new language by Governors who were anxious to keep in favor with the central authority. All the business of state, even in the most outlying provinces, was at this time conducted in Arabic, and if any intellectual Persian felt the "itch of the pen," he doubtless found it answered his purpose better in every way to write in Arabic. In the case of prose compositions this was certainly the case. With Mohammedanism—an outward profession of which was almost universally enforced—the Persians found themselves obliged to adopt into their spoken language Arabic terminology, and to employ in their writing the Arabic alphabet. In adopting this latter they, however, went from bad to less bad; for, unsuitable as that alphabet is for conveying the sounds of any other language, it was at least an improvement on the alphabet it superseded, which was limited, confused and in every sense unpractical.

Now, a learned Persian of this period, on whatever subject he might wish to write, had three distinct incentives for composing in Arabic: firstly, that being an exceedingly difficult language, fame would accrue to him for having mastered it; secondly, a knowledge of Arabic implied an intimate acquaintance with the Koran, which, in its turn, was a guarantee of piety; thirdly, he would win favor in high quarters. Such, doubtless, were among the causes which led all the early Persian *prosateurs* to write in Arabic, and it is a notable fact—and one often overlooked—that

many Persian authors, whose works have been translated from Arabic into European languages, have wrongly attained celebrity as Arabs. Avicenna (died 1037), to quote one example out of many, was a Persian bred and born, but as he wrote exclusively in Arabic, he is not always recognized as such.

Let us now turn to Persian Literature proper. Though we hear incidentally of one or two poets who wrote in Persian during the first half of the tenth century, it is not until we reach the establishment of the national Samanid dynasty in Central Asia that we find any real development in this direction. As the founder of this new school we may take the blind poet Rūdagi, who died about 950 of our era. He and his followers wrote, indeed, in Persian, but their vocabulary was surcharged with Arabic words, and their style was in pure imitation of Arabic poetry. The rulers of the national dynasty, who were yearly becoming more independent of the Kalif, naturally spared no effort to encourage the growth of a national literature.

Great as was the encouragement given by the Samanids to letters, the fame of their court was cast into comparative shade by the brilliancy of the Court of Ghazna. Sultan Mahmūd of Ghazna, the second of his line, who reigned from 998 to 1030, was not only a glorious general, but the greatest early patron of Persian Literature. He is said to have assembled at his court no less than four hundred poets, of whom one was elected to the post of "King of the Poets," or Poet Laureate,—an office that has continued to exist at the Court of Persia to the present day.

The compositions of these poets consisted mainly of occasional odes and panegyrics, with here and there a lyric in praise of some imaginary beauty. They took as their models the two principal forms of poetical composition of the Arabs, namely the *Kasīda* and the *Ghazal*. These two styles are almost identical in form and in order of rhyme; but, while the former usually exceeds twenty-five couplets, the latter seldom exceeds twelve, and has this distinct characteristic that the poet always introduces his *nom de plume* into the last couplet. With regard to subject, the *Kasīda* corresponds to the Greek *Idyllium* or our elegy, while the *Ghazal* corresponds to our ode or lyric. The rules of metre are as strict as those of the classical languages, while their variety is far greater. In both the above mentioned forms the rhyme is on one and the same sound throughout each separate poem, and it is

essential that the first two half-couplets should rhyme together, and after that every second half couplet.

Perhaps this method may be best explained by an attempt to render into English one or two Persian *Ghazals*. In a *Ghazal*, the sense of each couplet is complete in itself, and seldom has any direct connection with what precedes or follows it. The following is a rendering of one of Hâfiz's most beautiful odes. The running rhyme is preserved, and the metre adopted is as follows:

- u - - | - u - - | - u - - | - u - -

Now from out the graceful cypress doth the patient bulbul cry:

"From the rose's face be distant ever more the evil eye!"

Though the Zealot hopeful be of Houries and of Palaces,

My Belov'd my Hourie is, the Tavern is my palace high.

On account of Separation from thee no complaint I make,

Only after Separation can our Union Joy supply.

And if others do derive their pleasures from the Dance and Song,

My chief source of Joy and Pleasure, is my Lover's grief and sigh.

To the harp's sound drink the wine; but be not sad, and if some one

Say to thee, "Oh, Drink no wine," say, "There's a Pardoner in the Sky!"

Hâfiz, why dost thou of Grief at Separation make Complaint?

There is Light in Darkness; Union, Separation doth imply.

The following ode is taken from the works of the greatest mystic poet of Persia, Jalâl ud-Dîn Rûmî, who died in 1273:

From all the world 'twas thee alone I chose,

Wilt thou from grieving give me no repose?

My heart is as a pen within thy hand,

Thou canst of both my grief and joy dispose.

Save what thou wilt, what desire have I?

Thou mak'st to grow from me, now thorn, now rose.

If thou wouldst have me thus, lo! thus I am;

If otherwise, thy will I'll not oppose.

And in the vat where souls their color take,

Who am I, what shall Love or Hate disclose?

The following ode from the pen of Irâkî, who lived in the thirteenth century, may serve to exemplify the manner in which the real rhyme is sometimes thrown back into the body of the verse. The beauty of the Persian original is so striking that it may not be out of place to give a transcription of it:

u - - - | u - - - | u - - - | u - - -

1. *Ba jûz 'ishk-i-tu jânânî, namîbinam, namîbinam*
Dîlam râ jûz tu jânânî, namîbinam, namîbinam.
2. *Zi khûd sabrî ve ârâmî, namîyâbam, namîyâbam,*
Zi tu lutfi ve âhsânî, namîbinam, namîbinam.
3. *Zi râyi lutfi binumâ râ, ki dardî râ ki mandâram*
Ba jûz râyi tu darmânî, namîbinam, namîbinam.
4. *Bagfir, ay dâst, dâst-i-man, ki dar daryâ'i ufâdam*
Ki ânâ hich pâyânâm namîbinam, namîbinam.

5. *Zi rāh-i-lutf u dildāri bīyā sāmān-i-kār-i-man*
Ki khād rā bi tu sāmānī namibīnam, namibīnam.
 6. *Irākī rā ba dargāhat rahi binumā ki dar 'ālam*
Chu ā sar-gashtā hayrānī, namibīnam, namibīnam.

Translation:—

1. Beloved, aught but Love of thee, I cannot see, I cannot see,
 And in my heart aught else but thee, I cannot see, I cannot see.
2. Within myself or peace or rest, I cannot find, I cannot find,
 Pity or kindness meant for me, I cannot see, I cannot see.
3. Out of thy mercy let me see thy face, to heal my malady
 For any other cure for me, I cannot see, I cannot see.
4. Beloved take my hand in thine, for I have fallen in a sea
 Of which the shore, if shore there be, I cannot see, I cannot see.
5. By way of pity and of love, come thou and settle my affairs,
 For means of succor without thee, I cannot see, I cannot see.
6. To poor Irākī show the road that leads to thee, for in this world
 A mortal more distressed than he, I cannot see, I cannot see.

Among the earliest Arab poetry we find not only *Kasīdas* describing the wild life of the desert, but also *Ghazals* of remarkable beauty. Antara, one of the most famous pre-Islamic poets, was the author of many charming lyrics. The following little extract from one of these may give the reader an idea of Bedouin hyperbole. A warrior thus sings to his lady:

"Nor did I forget thee while spears fell around where I stood,
 And the points of the White Indian blades were all wet with my blood;
 And fain I had kissed the bright swords of my enemies vile,
 For they flashed like thy teeth when thy lips go apart in a smile!"

It was at the court of the great Sultan Mahmūd, above mentioned, that Firdausī flourished, the Homer of Iran and author of the great Persian national epic, the "*Shah Nāma*," or "*Book of Kings*." Without being the actual founder of the epic style in Persian, Firdausī was one of the earliest and by far the greatest of its exponents. The poet form adopted for narrative verse in Persian is technically known as *Mathnavi*, i. e., the double (rhyme), so called because each half-couplet rhymed, and, unlike the Arabic *Kasīda* and *Ghazal*, the rhyme varied in every couplet.

Now, the epic was essentially Persian in origin and growth, and quite foreign to Arabic poetry, as was also the *Rubāy*, which had its origin about the same period, as the mouthpiece of a new school of thought. Although, as has been already observed, the Persians were quick to adopt the religion and language of their conquerors, their national spirit was not of the sort to die out, or be obliterated by the new spirit of Islam. In fact, it may be affirmed that the Persian, in thus readily acquiescing in the new order of things which was imposed upon him, allowed his national

sentiments and instincts to suffer far less damage than would have been the case had he offered a protracted outward opposition to Mohammedanism. Moreover, if Persia was quick to accept Islam, she was equally quick to set her own stamp upon the new religion.

Firdausi's great Epic was a reaction in favor of the old order, but one executed under the very auspices of Mohammedanism. The poet put into verse the old legendary history of Iran, and brought his narrative down, through historical times, to the defeat of the last Sassanian king at the hands of the Arabs. He took his materials from what he could find of the old books of the Zoroastrians, and from the legendary tales of public storytellers. The example set by Firdausi was soon followed by many poets, who sought for inspiration in his verse, and took for their subjects those episodes which had received only brief treatment at the hands of the master: none of them, however, approached him in genius and power.

In his old age, Firdausi, moved perhaps by a religious sentiment, wrote a romantic poem entitled "*Yūsuf and Zulaykhā*"—also in the *Mathnavi* form—which told of the loves of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, basing his narrative on that version of the Bible story which Mohammed had incorporated into the Koran. In this style of composition, however, he was surpassed by his later imitators, and Nizāmi (died in 1203), who composed five famous romantic poems, holds the undisputed field as the greatest master of the romantic school. The last great representative of this school was Jāmi, who lived in the fifteenth century, and who may be regarded as the last poet of the classic period.

It is not within the scope of this article to deal with the engrossing subject of Persian mysticism, known as Sufism. The "mystic" movement in Mohammedanism began in the eighth century, and although it was in the first place an essentially orthodox movement, it took rapid growth in the direction of free-thought and heterodoxy when transplanted to Persian soil. The first great exponent of Sufism, in its fully developed form, was Abū Saīd ibn Abi l-Khayr, who was born in Khorasan in 968, and who died in 1049. He was the first to compose that style of epigrammatic quatrain with which readers of Omar are now so familiar. The quatrain, therefore, was even more than the epic, an original Persian product, both in form and spirit.

Thus we see that there are four principal types of poetical

composition used by the Persians; namely, the *Kasīda*, the *Ghazal*, the *Mathnavi* and the *Rubāy*. Of these, the two former were borrowed from the Arabic, while the two latter were of Persian invention. Most of the earlier poets confined themselves to one of these styles, but in later times a single poet would try his skill at all of them, as did notably Sādi and Jami. The collected *Kasīdas*, *Ghazals* and *Rubāys* of a poet are called his *Divān*, and in manuscripts they are usually placed in this order, each style being, in its turn, arranged alphabetically according to the rhyme. One cannot, however, speak of the *Divān* of Firdausi or of Omar, because they confined themselves to one style and did not write *Ghazals*. If a poet wrote romances and ornate prose as well as the other styles, his collected works then receive the name of *Kulliyāt*, or "Complete Works."

Few, probably, among the reading public who are interested in Omar have any conception of the state of the book-market, or of the manner in which literature is diffused, in Persia. Some may picture to themselves a state of affairs similar to that in Europe, with a certain admixture of Oriental slowness and lack of method; while others may suppose that Persia can boast of no book-market at all, beyond the casual buying and selling of manuscripts.

Now, in some parts of the East, printing, bookselling and journalism have—especially during the last ten or twenty years—been developed to a comparatively high degree. Both Constantinople* and Cairo possess excellent printing presses, which are responsible for numberless books and journals; nor are these two capitals the only Oriental towns which boast of a printing press. Nevertheless, Persia is at the present day entirely dependent upon lithography for her native production of books and journals—which are very rare. At the beginning of the present century a press with movable types was set up in Tabriz, at which a certain number of books were printed. The effort, however, met with no encouragement, and had shortly afterwards to be abandoned. The unpopularity of type-printing in Persia is due to two principal causes; firstly, the straightness of the lines offends a Persian's artistic sense; and, secondly, in printed books the *character* of the letters is entirely lost. The same cause which leads a Persian to esteem so highly great calligraphers, makes him deplore all absence

* The first book printed in Constantinople bears the date of 1713.

of character in a type-printed book. What most delights him is a well-written manuscript, and he takes the same delight in the copyist's work as we take in the touch of an old master. Failing this, he contents himself with a lithograph, which is usually the fac-simile of the writing of some fairly good scribe, and has, at any rate, a human element about it.

It is hard for us to credit the vast amount of attention that is paid to calligraphy in the East, where men of learning devote years to its acquirement, and their best days to making artistic copies of classical works. Although this art is dying out to a certain extent, owing to the cheapness of lithography, a man may even to this day in Persia become as famous for his writing as a poet for his verses.

In every big bazaar a certain number of shops are set apart for the sale of books. In these one finds the bookseller—in his long, dark, outer mantle and his high, black, lamb's-skin hat—seated on the floor, surrounded by his little stock-in-trade. The front of his shop is open, like a butcher's, while his books are either arranged in shelves against the three walls, or in heaps upon the floor. His collection usually consists of lithograph editions of Korans, school-books, favorite poets and historians, but the assortment is limited. Besides these, hidden away in a corner, he often has one or two manuscripts which he has either bought as a speculation or is trying to dispose of for a friend.

The number of standard works that have been lithographed in Persia is comparatively small, and a great many important compositions—both poetry and prose—to this day exist only in manuscript. Many Persian classics owe their release from this state of relative oblivion to the efforts of Indians and Europeans. It will, doubtless, surprise some to hear that the works of many Persian poets who enjoy celebrity among their own countrymen have been neither lithographed nor printed.

The ordinary family library consists of a copy of the Koran, in Arabic, the works of one or two poets, a dictionary and a book of general history. Large libraries are rare. Books are not kept, as with us, in an upright position, but lying on their sides, one above the other, with their backs to the wall, while the title of the book, when indicated at all, is written across the front edge.

During the present century Persia has produced three poets of a high order of genius, Kāāni of Shiraz, Yaghmā of Khorasan

and Mirza Serūsh of Ispahan, all of whom, in clearness of diction and elegance of style, fall very little short of Hafiz and Šādi. In fact, so great was Kāāni's command of language, and so musical his ear, that some of his poems surpass in charm anything else in Persian literature. Besides these real poets, Persia has produced and continues to produce numberless poetasters, whose chief aim is to imitate as closely as possible the classic standard, and who care little or nothing for originality in either thought or treatment. Every Persian is more or less of a poet, and has a natural instinct for rhyme; perhaps no language lends itself more readily to versification. Apropos of the readiness of Persians in *extempore* verse, countless tales are told of men and women who composed verses, quatrains and even *Ghazals* just before their death. Very well known are the lines composed by the popular minister of Fath Ali Shah, when the executioners suddenly came and told him that his master—who feared his minister's extreme popularity—had ordered him to be put to death at once: "Such is the way of the world; first it covers one with honors, then it smothers one with thorns. Fate, the Juggler, many tricks of this sort loves to use."

The actual state of Persian literature cannot be called flourishing. Its latest development is in the direction of popular plays, chiefly comedies: but, though they offer interesting specimens of modern colloquial Persian, they are merely translations from the Turkish of Trans-Caucasia, and do not, therefore, represent any literary activity in Persia.

If education has become more general in Persia than formerly, it is certainly less serious: if one can find more people who know how to read and write than would have been possible in former times, on the other hand one rarely encounters serious study of any branch of science, unless it be in the direction of philosophical speculation.

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